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The Right of Suffrage

William Batchelder Greene

1875

OWN and State paupers are persons notoriously incapable of supporting themselves, because demonstrably devoid of the faculties demanded for a successful administration of their own private affairs. Being incompetent to acquit themselves with credit in matters with which they are presumably conversant, they cannot be trusted to exercise sovereignty in matters pertaining to the general welfare. Paupers are persons and people; but they are not voting people.

Insane persons and idiots are notorious for their incapacity for self-government, and have, by law, and on account of their incapacity, guardians appointed over them to prevent them from injuring themselves and others. It is with a view to the public good, that the privilege of voting is denied to maniacs and underwitted people, and simply for the reason that the privilege of voting cannot be intrusted to irresponsible hands. Idiots and madmen are persons and people; but they are not *voting* people.

Persons convicted of infamous crimes are stamped, and by the very fact of their conviction, with the seal of their own immorality. Convicts, as such, furnish; no guaranty of good intentions. No confidence can be felt, that, in any of their acts, they

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really mean to do right: they are entitled, therefore, to no lot or part in the government of the well-meaning and virtuous portion of the community. Convicts are persons and people; but they are not *voting* people.

Paupers, lunatics, and idiots, and convicted knaves, are all of them *persons*, all of them *people*; and yet the elective franchise is denied them, *and justly denied them*. The theory is false, therefore, which teaches that the elective franchise is a natural and inalienable right of man as man; for we have already found three enumerated classes of men, who, in every well-regulated community, are debarred from the privilege of voting.

Society, in its collective capacity, when it confers the right of voting upon some of the individuals who compose it, to the exclusion of others, acts, or ought to act, with a view to the good of the whole people; and it places, or ought to place, the governmental power, or actual political sovereignty, exclusively in the hands of such of its members as are presumably capable of exercising it for the common welfare. The *natural* people, the whole community, includes, on the one side, all the men, women, and children,—wise persons and fools, sober-minded persons and lunatics, honest people and scoundrels,—who are subjects of the government. The *legal* people includes, on the other side, that part of the natural people, and that part only, which, having by positive law a right to vote, has been legitimately clothed with political sovereignty. The legal voter is a public officer, duly constituted as such, and represents, on the average, five or more non-voters, who are women, children, or men deprived of the suffrage. It is comparatively seldom that any one can possess a just claim to vote in his own right only. The elective franchise is a trust, and not a right; a duty imposed on the voter, not with a view to his own good only, or to his own presumed natural right, but with a view to the general welfare. The demand for the ballot ought never, therefore, to be made by the claimant in his own behalf only, but should also be made in behalf of the persons dependent upon him for

support and protection, and who are entitled to be represented by a legal voter whose interests are identified with their own

Every social compact implies the prior existence of the special society which makes it. Organic society does not, therefore, originate in any compact. Society is older than government. But every persisting society implies the existence of government and laws; for a society without government and laws is at once overturned by its madmen and scoundrels, and lapses into barbarism. Government and laws are naturally determined by the conditions of society, and are divinely instituted (that is to say, exist by a natural necessity established by Nature's Maker) for the protection of the honest and sober-minded portion of the community against knaves and fanatics.

Women tell us, from their platforms, that they must and will have the ballot, in order to be enabled, by processes of legislation, to stop the men's liquor and tobacco. Other legislation, of a similar nature, and of wide application, is also proposed by women. This talk is symptomatic of intellectual and moral immaturity on their part. The sovereignty which is freely given to the women from affection, and by which they exercise control over the habit and manners of the men, will be taken from such of them, and ought to be taken from such of them, as try to ground their empire in positive law. If any real and genuine desire exists, on the side of the women, to be recognized by the men as having reached the age of political majority, and if they really wish to see their names inscribed on the voting-lists, it might not be amiss for the more prominent leaders of them to make an immediate and radical change of tactics. An increased appearance of disinterestedness, and less self-assertion, would work to their advantage.

The maxim, "Taxation without representation is tyranny," which is not at all true absolutely, was temporarily true in America at the time of the American Revolution. The claim of the British parliament to tax the unrepresented colonies in all cases whatsoever, was, practically, a denial of the right of

Americans “to acquire, possess, and enjoy *property*.” This right is now guaranteed to the women of Massachusetts by the Massachusetts Bill of Rights, which is the most essential part of Massachusetts fundamental law. Such a one-sided and partial exercise by the Massachusetts legislature of the power to tax women, as would abridge the right of the women “to acquire, possess, and enjoy property,” would be vetoed by the judges, who are all of them sworn “to support the constitution of Massachusetts.” The final decision of the judges on the ten-hour law (which abridges the right of a certain class of women “to acquire property,” by prohibiting them from working more than ten hours a day) has not yet been definitively rendered. Never, since the beginning of legislation, have so many effectual laws been made for the protection of women’s property, at the expense of men’s property, as are being made in Massachusetts at the present time. The reformatory women would do well, in the interest of the cause they have at heart, to abstain from incoherent utterances.

Women should ground their claim to the ballot, if they propose to claim it at all, not on the fact of their past opportunities for instruction and culture, not on the fact that they hold, in their own names, the title to revenue-yielding property, but on the fact that they are, themselves, at the existing moment of time, useful and profitable members of the industrially-productive community, or the natural representatives of useful and profitable members. The present injustice done to the working-women, in the matter of deficient wages as compared with men’s wages, would soon be cured, if the politicians were made dependent, for their promotion to office, on women’s votes. It is hard to assign any valid reason—if we leave out-of sight the indications of intellectual and moral imbecility afforded by many of the platform advocates of female suffrage—why women who keep boarding-houses, female physicians and school-teachers, milliners, mantua-makers, girls working at wages, and the like, should not vote.

Heretofore, many ladies have grounded a claim to the ballot, not on the fact that they are now, or ever have been, producers of wealth, but on the fact that they hold in their hands the results of the economic production of other people, in the form of inherited wealth, on which taxes are leviable; and also on the ground that they are very “accomplished” (if anybody knows what that means), having enjoyed exceptional advantages for instruction and culture. Such ladies owe a debt of gratitude to the Commonwealth, which has protected them, and now protects them, in the enjoyment of their privileges; but the right to vote is no necessary adjunct of the duty to show gratitude.

Culture is, politically speaking, “bosh,” humbug. It is, like the horses of the Egyptians, “flesh, and not spirit.” It represents the enjoyment of past advantages, and gives no claim on the future. On it, no political right can be grounded. Representative’ personages of the very first mark, and honorably mentioned in history, have been, many of them, unable to read or write. Moses could both read and write; but Abraham, who was greater than Moses, could do neither of these things.